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Main Breadwinner Women in Hungary and Their Work-family Balance Related Coping Strategies¹

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Abstract

In this study, being the first Hungarian qualitative study devoted to this subject, we focus on the work-life balance situation of Hungarian women acting as main breadwinners within their family. The empirical base of our study consisted of 22 in-depth interviews conducted with Hungarian mothers of dependent children younger than 14, living in (heterosexual) couple households, who bring in at least 60 per cent of the total household earnings. We examined how the main breadwinner role might affect the gender norm expectations acquired during socialisation, the division of domestic labour and child care duties between the partners, as well as the internal power relations of the couple.

According to our findings, various versions of work-life balance management could be identified even within our small-scale qualitative sample on the basis of two main dimensions.

On the one hand, on the basis of our interviewees' accounts we examined whether the partners had similar role expectations in terms of egalitarian sharing of family related tasks or traditionally gendered role specialisation. On the other hand, we have also considered to what extent other contextual factors contributed to women becoming primary breadwinners, and whether these were perceived in terms of external constraints or preferred choices (or both). On the basis of our analyses we have identified four models of family relations in the context of primary female breadwinning: the traditional, the egalitarian, the externally forced role reversal and the consciously implemented role reversal models.

Keywords: primary breadwinner women; Hungary; qualitative research; work-life balance.

1. Introduction

In most European countries the number of women acting as main breadwinners within families is still low (Klesment and Van Bavel, 2015), even though a decline in male breadwinning can be observed since the second half of the 20th century. The increasing level of female education may lead to a higher earning potential in the paid labour market and consequently to an increasing number of women becoming main breadwinners.

One of the first qualitative studies on this subject described 'WASP' (i.e., wives as senior partners) as 'a previously ignored contemporary marriage pattern' in the United States (Atkinson and Boles, 1984: 861). The authors referred to negative evaluations by others as the social cost of this form of deviation: when husbands were described as 'unmasculine losers' and wives were seen as 'unladylike, domineering and manipulative' (Atkinson and Boles, 1984: 864). At the same time they also pointed to the rewards the WASP formations can provide, such as career opportunities and achievements for wives, for husbands relief from the burden of providing financial support for the whole family, and flexible gender-role model possibilities for children (Atkinson and Boles, 1984: 868).

North-American and Australian quantitative studies estimated that in approximately one quarter of dual-earner households the wife out-earns the husband (Winkler et al., 2005; Sussman and Bonnell, 2006; Drago et al., 2005). European quantitative studies using data from the French Labour Force Surveys examined female breadwinner activities as resulting from female emancipation and at the same time as a potentially new manifestation of the feminisation of poverty (Bloemen and Stancanelli, 2007; 2015). An increasing number of studies focus also on families with a stay-at-home father and a breadwinner mother (such as Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004 etc.), and on the benefits of sharing the responsibility for breadwinning among the married or cohabiting partners (Raley et al., 2006), including not only a higher level of household income and less financial stress, but also sharing common experiences and having more to talk about (Munsch, 2015).

Despite the changes in the family structures, the traditional gendered division of family labour and consequently the inequalities of household and parenting tasks have survived in many cases (Milkie et al., 2010; Takács, 2008). Child-rearing is still considered an inherently motherly duty as women are supposed to be more natural caregivers than men, even in those societies where the majority of women take part in paid work (Silverstein and Auberbach, 1999). This is also typical in the post-socialist countries, where during the state-socialist period female employment rates grew at a quicker pace and in a larger proportion than in Western European societies: however, gender equity regarding career opportunities for men and women has not been achieved, and doing housework and looking after children remained predominantly female tasks within the households (Gal and Kligman, 2000). Additionally, the 'discourse of a reverse gender order, composed of empowered women and failed patriarchs, resonates deeply in the post-Soviet world' (Radhakrishnan and Solari, 2015: 793): in various political contexts this can be used to warn of the potential harm caused by trying to alter the biologically determined capabilities of men and women regarding the traditionally gendered division of domestic labour.

Time use studies indicate that breadwinning women tend to do a higher proportion of the household chores and child-rearing than their male counterparts (Craig and Mullan, 2011). At the same time men tend to do more housework in dual-earner families than in male-breadwinner families, but typically they do not reach an equal level of housework with their female partner even in those cases when the woman happens to be the main breadwinner (Blaskó, 2006).

It is a well-documented practice especially among working class or poorer men that they can display compensatory behaviour by resisting housework and embracing an ‘ethic of exaggerated masculinity’ (Brines, 1994: 682) – a feature, we have also encountered in our present study. In this context ‘the routine performance or nonperformance of housework facilitates gender display’ (Brines, 1994: 662): for economically dependent husbands doing less housework is a way to ‘do gender’ (West and Zimmermann, 1987). Doing gender refers to the repetitious production and reinforcement of differences between men and women through a series of actions and accomplishments: while women practice and strengthen their femininity by providing care and performing household chores, men can perform masculinity by being the main breadwinner in the family and by not doing what women are expected to do, such as housework (Yavorsky et al., 2015; Deutsch, 2007).

Various Hungarian studies have found that heterosexual households are sites of doing gender in a traditional way: subordination of women and gender-based discrimination are still common experiences of many Hungarian women in the labour market and also at home (Neményi et al., 2013; Nagy, 2014; Tardos, 2012). In present day Europe, gender inequalities regarding labour market participation and domestic division of labour are most widespread in the post-socialist countries (Hobson and Oláh, 2006; Puur et al., 2008; Hobson and Fahlén, 2009). For instance, these inequalities are also reflected by the fact that in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic mothers with children younger than three have the lowest maternal employment rates within the EU.²

Mothers’ performing the main breadwinner role is not a widespread phenomenon in Hungary, characterised by traditionally familialistic social policy contexts (Dupcsik and Tóth, 2014), often reflecting the logic of the ‘Becker equilibrium’ (Esping-Andersen, 2009: 10), a term referring to Becker’s (1981) – somewhat outdated – theory of household specialisation, according to which in order to achieve the highest level of household efficiency women tend to invest in domestic production, while men concentrate on market production. Therefore, according to the exchange-bargaining perspective, bargaining power is determined by the personal income position relative to the partner, and higher personal income might authorise one of the partners to carry out less work at home (Thébaud, 2010). However, this does not equally affect men and women in the breadwinner position, and the actual division of household labour does not necessarily reflect the division of the spouses’ income (Yavorsky et al., 2015; Nagy, 2016).

The significance of household specialisation has diminished over time: empirical studies have found that it does not seem to be strongly related to relationship satisfaction, while gender roles and family life related attitudes do (Schoen

² OECD Family Database (2015) <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm> Accessed: 2016-02-29

et al., 2006). For example, a recent study found that among contemporary Dutch couples ‘unions of equals are happier than unions of less equals’ (Keizer and Komter, 2015: 965), implying that too much household specialisation does not contribute to the well-being of couples.

In Hungary, similarly to other post-socialist societies, women are influenced by a historically determined *gender yo-yo effect*, subjecting them to contradictory normative expectations about their ‘natural’ roles, while dragging them back and forth between work and home (Takács, 2013). Competing norms of working versus stay-at-home parenting (especially mothering) and numerous demands to be met in parallel can generate tensions that may endanger the achievement of an optimal work-family balance. Parents, especially mothers, are increasingly likely to experience a time squeeze, reinforced by the structural characteristics of the Hungarian labour market, such as insecure employment, low wages, long working time regimes and limited opportunities to work part-time (Hobson et al., 2011).

2. Data and methods

This article focuses on the findings of a qualitative research study that was conducted in 2014 and 2015 in Hungary as part of a broader research project on new gender roles and their implications for family life in Europe.³ Our main research questions were centred on how the fact that it is not the man but the woman who is the main breadwinner – at least financially – can affect the dynamics of family practices especially in term of sharing household and child care tasks, as well as the spouses’ power relations and their gender role perceptions acquired through socialisation.

Even though female breadwinning is a defining feature in single-mother households, we have not included single mothers into our sample, because we wanted to learn more about the coping mechanisms of couples, characterised by the female partner being the main breadwinner in a Hungarian social context, where this family income generating pattern is considered quite unusual within partnerships. We wanted to find out whether problems that might derive from this situation – including potentially lower income levels for the families due to the gender pay gap, difficulties of developing a satisfying work-family balance due to the increased work load on women, and role conflicts deriving from tensions between traditional norms of femininity and practices of working women – would contribute to the disintegration of the interviewees’ family life or whether family members can cope well with these irregularities. We had assumed that specific forms of cooperation can develop between the spouses if there are no fundamental differences in their gender norm perceptions either by both of them supporting an egalitarian cooperation, which is not based primarily on traditional gender role related expectations or, on the contrary, by both of them believing in, as well as practising the traditional complementarity of separate roles and tasks for women and men in the family. The interviews can highlight whether (at least from the interviewed women’s perspective) the partners are

³ The Hungarian study on breadwinning wives was inspired by a similar study conducted by a research team of the German Youth Institute, led by Karin Jurczyk, within the FamiliesAndSocieties FP7 European collaborative project (<http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/>).

able to adapt without too much trouble to the irregular setting caused by the female occupation of the main breadwinner role, or whether they have to make compromises in order to maintain family harmony. However, compromises can lead to constraints: for example, when women besides devoting a lot of time and energy to their job with which they out-earn their partner, they also try to fulfil the traditional female role requirements of looking after the home and the children.

The empirical base of our study is a set of 22 in-depth interviews conducted with women who have been earning at least 60 per cent of the family income during the last two years. Additional selection criteria included co-residence with a husband or partner in a heterosexual relationship, and having dependent children younger than 14. Thus there are no single mothers or childless partnered women in our sample. The interviewees were found via advertising in electronic and print media, and by applying snowballing when that was possible.

Most interviewed women (13) were from Budapest, the capital city of Hungary, five of them came from small towns (located typically in the close surroundings of Budapest), and four women were from villages in an underdeveloped region of the Hungarian countryside. Half of the sample was in their thirties, seven in their forties and four in their fifties: the youngest being 33 and the oldest 59, with an average age of 39. The vast majority of the interviewees (16) had higher educational background (eleven had a Master's and three had a PhD degree), while there was only one woman whose highest level of education was elementary school, two completed vocational school, and three had medium level education. All interviewed women declared that they do not belong to any ethnic minority groups, except one: a Roma woman. Almost all of them worked as an employee with a permanent contract, only one woman was a self-employed entrepreneur; they worked in different fields but the financial and economic fields seemed to be dominating. Some worked as a lawyer, psychologist, communication expert, natural scientist but there were also social workers, a nurse and a cleaner among them. Even though these latter jobs could provide only relatively limited income, they functioned as the main income source for the families of some of the interviewed women.

When we compared the educational, employment and income related data of our interviewees and their male partners, the lower income level of these men seemed to correlate with their lower education attainment, and a less secure type of job or form of employment (for example, having seasonal or fixed term contract based employment). Some of the male partners had freelance jobs requiring varying labour intensity and characterised by employer driven flexibility; some were unemployed, including cases of long-term unemployment (related to the labour market restructuring following the political system change, leading to the devaluation of certain work skills and the disappearance of certain types of jobs); and a few men were pensioners. However, as it turned out from many of the interviews, the lower levels of the male partners' earnings were typically caused by the uncertainty of the available job opportunities: limited time periods of relatively well paid job opportunities fluctuating with certain periods of unemployment.

First, the interviewees gave their informed consent to take part in our research study. Then we asked them to fill in a questionnaire containing mainly demographic and attitudinal questions, followed by a semi-structured interview that lasted about an

hour on average. Each interview followed a standard topic guide, including open-ended questions on the interviewees' partnership and work history; describing family practices in a typical weekday; work-family balance issues with special emphasis on sharing housework and child care duties with the husband or partner; perceptions of their own role as the main breadwinner, their partner's and significant others' views on their family's 'irregular' breadwinning pattern; expectations and plans for the future.

The interviews were tape-recorded. The recorded interview material was first transcribed, and then the transcripts were structurally coded. Since there were only 22 interviews we have not used any specific computer assisted qualitative data analysis programs but relied on our own coding skills, and identified specific segments of interview texts that formed certain themes. These themes were related to the interviewees' practices, perceptions and feelings, and reflected not only the interviewees' individual experience in a subjective manner but also the normative expectations characterising the social contexts in which they emerged.

Due to limited resources we were able to conduct interviews only with the female partners but we could still gain some insight about the male partners' reactions to being in the 'out-earned situation' through the women's narratives. We expected that some of the male partners especially those who strongly believe in relationship equity would face this situation without too much trouble, while other men would feel trapped in a compromise, where his bargaining power is more limited than hers and thus he would be forced into participating in traditionally feminine household duties.

3. Findings

In our interviews we identified four models of family relations, which we refer to as (1) the traditional, (2) the egalitarian, (3) the externally forced role reversal and (4) the consciously implemented role reversal models. These models were constructed by examining the structurally coded interview material in two main dimensions. On the one hand, we examined whether in the view of our interviewees both partners had similar role expectations in terms of egalitarian sharing of family related tasks or traditionally gendered role specialisation. On the other hand, we have also considered to what extent other contextual factors (such as the work type and/or employment form as well as the income level of the partners, the number and age of children etc.) contributed to the woman becoming the primary breadwinner, either from the very beginning of the partnership or as a result of changes leading to a temporary arrangement that remained permanent.

During the interview analyses, we aimed to establish whether the examined families can function well in their 'unconventional set-up', whether the women's incomes can provide financial security for the families, whether the partners can cope with those difficulties that derive specifically from their 'irregular functioning', and whether the family cooperation strategies can work effectively in this context, and the couples are able to develop a sustainable, work-family balanced, and more or less stress-free family life. At the same time, we were interested in the practical implementation of the couples' division of domestic labour, and whether these arrangements were perceived as fair or unfair, at least from the interviewed women's perspectives. We have also examined whether there are conflicts between the

maternal and the occupational roles of the interviewed women, and how they can handle these potentially conflicting roles. Additionally, we were interested in whether these families are capable of developing a 'harm-free' interpersonal collaboration between the partners and work out practical decision-making procedures regarding child care, domestic division of labour, and money management.

Among the four models those that were based on similar role expectation of the partners – let them be similarly traditional or egalitarian – projected higher relationship stability than those where 'role reversal' occurred. In the case that 'role reversal' was seen by our interviewees as being accepted by both partners, they were able to develop a perhaps unusual, yet harmonious family cooperation – at most they had to bear disapproving views of their social environment.

However, in those family settings where the – even temporary – 'role reversal' was the result of external constraints, and neither the presently main breadwinner wife nor the former main breadwinner husband (who might have also suffered from an injured self-esteem due to the loss of his masculinity-supporting position) could identify with the situation, tensions and conflicts were more likely to emerge. We have to note that among the examined 22 families there were a few that showed signs of disintegration already during the time of the data collection: in some cases these signs became incorporated in our interviewees' narratives as explicit references to the possibility of separation or even divorce.

3.1. *Traditional model*

There were only three cases that could be categorised under this heading. In these three cases both parties believed in and practised traditionally gendered role specialisation, where breadwinner work activities are primarily seen as the man's job, while child-rearing and household duties are considered as the woman's job. In these settings we can still recognise the well-known 'Becker equilibrium' (Esping-Andersen, 2009: 10) with its traditional *male breadwinner – female home-maker* family model: even though the woman has – 'accidentally' – become the main breadwinner for various reasons, she consciously undertakes the double burden, trying to reconcile family responsibilities and income-generating activities and act as if she were not out-earning her husband. She accepts, and occasionally expects, her partner's increased participation in domestic tasks, but their division of domestic labour largely reflects the traditional pattern she has learnt in her family of origin during childhood socialisation. This seems to be a quite conflict-free form of family life, as the woman submits to a traditional social order, and even though she is the main contributor to the total family income, she does not act as the head of the family and does not gain increased decision-making power either.

In two of the three cases the higher income of the interviewed women was due to their higher level of education, more secure workplace, and specialised qualifications ensuring greater earning power on the job market, while in the third case the husband had already retired and had only a small pension. One of our

interviewees (13)⁴ works in a senior position at a chemistry laboratory; she married a widower who brought two children to the marriage, and then they had three more children together. They belong to a religious community with her husband which provides them with a special bond. She is committed to the traditional cast of family tasks: their children were born one after the other, and she has spent altogether seven years at home with the children on maternity leave. Even though the husband became unemployed several times during this seven year period neither she nor her husband would have felt it 'natural' that the father stayed at home for a certain period of child care allowance.

Another representative of the traditional model (8) lives in a small town, raising a daughter from her first marriage and a son of her current marriage. She has been the sole breadwinner in the family for a longer period of time: she works at a social service association that provides stable and sufficient income relative to the local conditions. Her husband lost his work a long time ago due to the long-term economic deterioration characterising the Northern Hungarian region, where they live. He can only occasionally get relatively well-paying casual jobs. However, despite their long-term work situation, characterised by the wife's main breadwinning activities, and the husband's unemployment, neither of them questions their traditionally gendered role specialisation.

A very clear example of the traditional family model is provided by a highly positioned intellectual interviewee (2) who attributes her steady career progress mainly to her diligence and higher educational achievements, while she does not recognise any status difference between herself and her husband who has only a vocational qualification and partly engages in manual work.

During the ten years of our relationship, he has lost his job several times, searched for other jobs, sometimes found a better job, sometimes worse... My path was a bit straighter and easier after I finished the university. There was a time [when] ... it could be felt that there is a bit of a grievance in my husband about me earning more and working in such a [prestigious] workplace... both of us are coming from quite simple families, so it's a very big thing.

However, she took for granted that she would stay at home with the children for years and the father would not take any parental leave.

It did not come to our mind because when I was at home on child care allowance, he always earned quite well so it was logical that he has to stay in the labour market. Additionally, when I worked as a university lecturer, well let's face it, it's not a nine to five job, it is much more relaxed time wise [than his jobs].

In their household housework is also shared in a conventional way:

⁴We refer to our interviewees with numbers in order to protect their anonymity.

There are specifically male and female roles, you can see that. Obviously, no way... I am not willing to change a light bulb. I say that I got married so that I would never have to replace a light bulb.

At the same time she points out that it was an important factor when choosing a workplace that her bosses would take into account that because of her maternal duties they cannot expect overtime or any extra workload.

3.2. Egalitarian model

Four of our interviewees lived in a family setting that we categorised as belonging to the egalitarian model. While they had completely different socialisation backgrounds, they all live in non-subordination-based relationships, where the partners mutually adapt to each other's needs. In three cases the marriage resulted from their first major relationship, which has been going on since their youth, while in the fourth case it was a second marriage that could be seen as an attempt to correct the mistakes of the first. In these cases it seemed to be an important aspect of partner choice that his views on domestic division of labour would not prevent her career development especially after childbearing, and reconciliation of work and family issues would be based on individual needs assessment and mutually satisfying negotiations between the partners.

A military officer interviewee (15), with a law degree and an upward career trajectory, met her husband during their university years. The husband is a university lecturer with an academic career. They raise their two children together with hardly any external help, and perform their family tasks harmoniously and attentively to each other. In her perception the difference between their incomes does not reflect different workloads, only different earning power:

In an ideal world a university professor wouldn't earn less than a military officer ... My main problem with this situation is that he works much more than I do... while he receives only a fraction of my salary.

In her workplace choice family and career compatibility played a significant role:

This was definitely part of the decision when I chose this job in public administration relatively early in my career that it is compatible with childbearing and family life. Additionally it provides a quite decent income, and the working hours are also fine.

At the same time in her view her husband sees it as natural that he takes his part in the household duties by taking advantage of his flexible working hours.

He does the laundry because he spends more time at home, and he partly does the shopping... and sometimes he cleans up when he is at home during the day and has time for it.

A university lecturer (21), having second and third jobs partly because of financial needs and partly because of commitment to certain NGO activities, organises their parity based marriage and family life in agreement with her husband. They have two children. The husband has a lower level of education than the wife, and finds jobs with varying degrees of success – but this does not cause tension in their relationship:

...he thinks that we should work to be able to live (not the other way around), to be able to accomplish what we want in life.

Carrying out household duties does not depend on their gender:

His views on these roles are different from the average male. ... To tell the truth, I do not think much of those other men: they act as if they are really disabled, when they don't know where the sugar is [in the kitchen] or cannot even prepare scrambled eggs. This is not a specific female skill... I can hammer nails into the wall, it is not a problem for me... these are not gender-specific tasks...

Even if their different attitude to paid work does not cause any problems between them and they are able to share child care and domestic responsibilities without any conflict, they often have to face the disapproval of their environment:

...it is damned difficult to go against the mainstream. ... In the circle of my female friends and in the whole neighbourhood we are seen as a very strange family ... [here] everyone has an average of four kids, and stays at home as a full-time mother. In their eyes I am a careerist and a monster mother. [It...] is very 'new right[wing]' and very much organised according to the classic traditional gender roles.

Another interviewee (19) in this group, a chief financial manager of a multinational company lives with her daughter who was born in her previous marriage and her second husband in a big country town. Learning from the failure of her former marriage, she wanted a fresh start in her second marriage, with new family arrangements. Her career has been steadily rising since university. She feels that with her second husband they perfectly complement each other. The high income and security of her job allowed him to launch a business which can expand his creativity. She does not find the reconciliation of her work and family life hard, even with the occasionally very long working hours and night-time work:

I can concentrate on my work and stay in extra hours any time ... because I know that at home everything is fine ... My working hours are limitless. There are practical problems to be solved, no matter how long it takes. ... I earn enough to provide for the whole family, and at least one of us can do what he enjoys to do ... at least he does not have to suffer from stress every day in the miserable life of being someone else's employee, and he can do what he loves to do.

In her view sharing their domestic duties is also well-balanced, and tension-free, mainly because of *'my husband's blessed good spirit'*. Although she gained practical experiences of how to practice traditional gender roles in her family of origin and during her first marriage, she prefers mutual support and equal sharing of duties among the partners:

My first husband came from a [traditional] family, where things didn't really work this way. If he felt like it, he cooked a meal, it was like a hobby. But he was of the view that there are no obligations on him at home.

Another interviewee from this group (18), having a secure, professionally satisfying, well-paying job also in the financial sector, based her relationship with her husband on mutual adjustments and not on traditional gender roles.

The way we live is close to how I imagine the ideal family... I think the ideal case is when burdens are shared equally. Even if I wanted to spend more time with child care this is not feasible with my work schedule ... We have this understanding that we both take part in child raising equally, there is no such deal that I bring in the money, and you look after the child; it is a shared task.

After the birth of their child she stayed at home for three years on parental leave but the flexibility of the husband's job helped her to return to work and move on with her career.

3.3. Externally forced role reversal model

Seven interviewees live in a family setting that we categorised as belonging to this model.

A common feature of this very heterogeneous group was that all of them started their relationship with their partner in a rather traditional set-up partly due to their family socialisation patterns and their unthoughtful conception of marriage and family life, which they started at a relatively young age, and partly due to their partners' traditional masculine gender display. However, for various reasons, their families had to face such challenges that transformed the wife into a primary breadwinner, thus contrary to their original expectations they had to learn to cope with this situation.

This group includes intellectuals such as women in very prestigious jobs with outstanding income levels as well as ambitious artists, whose partners had lost their jobs or who had become unsuccessful; a highly positioned Hungarian female manager with a foreign husband, and social worker women from a small village (including a Roma woman) whose husbands are unable to find work in that region of Hungary. In these cases the partners' views on marriage, family, paid work and domestic duties do not necessarily differ from each other: it is rather the gradually emerging and often long lasting overturn of the usual power balance regarding the income generation patterns within the families that can cause serious conflicts and much tension, so much so in some cases that this can lead to the idea of separation or even divorce.

Three interviewees in this group grew up in a traditional peasant or manual worker family setting and prepared for the traditional roles of becoming a wife and a mother as their main goal of life. However, despite their relatively low level of education, they were able to attain new skills to qualify for not particularly well paying, but secure positions in the job market. This way they were able to maintain their family financially even on their own. In two cases the marriage got into crisis due to this externally constrained career change of the wives – but at the same time this experience could provide them with self-esteem and a sense of agency that they had never encountered before when they were ready to accept their secondary rank in the family.

An interviewee (9) from the countryside, got married at a young age, and acquired qualifications and started to work when she was already a mother. On the basis of her own family socialisation and the experiences she gained during the first years of their marriage she was prepared for the traditional arrangements of family life. Even though sustaining their family required two incomes she still felt that her paid work activities were clashing with her maternal responsibilities.

After having our second child I went back to high school... and when my son was four I started to look around to find a job ... but it felt very strange [to go to work] ... what will happen to the child? What will happen at home?

Since the husband lost his previous stable job and can work only temporarily in casual jobs, he is not as able to provide security for the family that she would prefer. Even though she identifies with the conventional female role she learnt from her mother, their real life situation with the double burden of paid work and housework that she has to take on by herself, makes her aware of how anachronistic and offensive her husband's masculinity performance can be for her:

...perhaps it is because of my upbringing: my mother kept telling me all the time that women should remain women, and when the husband goes to work ... by the time he comes home, the meal should be ready and the table should be set ...[but] there was a point when I realised that perhaps this is not a good thing to do.

In comparison with the previous case, very different circumstances transformed a highly positioned female professional with one child from Budapest into primary breadwinner of the family, when her husband's career got into a decline. In their case neither of them wanted to consciously follow any normatively prescribed family roles but she had internalised some elements of conventional gender socialisation – especially those connected to the priority of maternal duties over paid work responsibilities – to such an extent that even though she could fully count on her husband's contribution to child care when returning to the labour market earlier than she had originally planned, she could not accept this situation as a 'normal' one.

Practically I have been providing for the whole family alone for the last six years. It is very distressing that our family stands only on one foot, and if

anything happens to me, no one knows what will happen. I think that's an awful lot of responsibility. ... I am gently trying to force him back to the world of work...

At the same time her husband's very active involvement in child care makes it easier for her to reconcile her paid work and family life. In fact the husband's involvement in looking after their daughter has been greater than hers:

Our little daughter was born with a pretty severe congenital kidney disorder, which was discovered when she was one year old, and for the next one and a half years, until she got operated, it was really very necessary to have someone who could hold the fort at home so actually at that time it came in really handy that he could not work...

However, her narratives reflect many internal conflicts and regrets deriving from her two main conflicting roles of mother and employee:

Well, if I regret anything, it is that I went back to work perhaps too soon... it still really hurts... My daughter was only 11 months old... But I very much regret that I did not stay at home with her for another year. It was a very difficult decision... there was this dilemma that now I can stay at home with complete existential uncertainty or I can come back here [to work] and do what I love to do, but there is a price for that...

3.4. Consciously implemented role reversal model

This family model represents mostly the idea that the 'breadwinner women' term might bring to most people's mind. The eight cases we have grouped under this heading include women who do play dominant roles in managing and controlling the life of their family. This dominant role performance could partly derive from their higher than average education and specific career choice, partly from different life-cycle positions of the male partners, and also from other personality related and personal reasons that could not necessarily be explored in full detail during the interviews.

Within this category, compared with the whole sample, there is a higher proportion of those couples where the female and/or the male partner live in their second or third marriage, and in some cases the previous relationship failed exactly because the former partner could not accept the woman's aspirations to build her own career. Since all of these families live at a relatively high material standard, the somewhat lower income level of one party does not lead to conflicts, and despite the increased workload of the main breadwinner, the daily operation of their family life is provided without any major problems. Besides the help from grandparents, most of the time paid external help can contribute to the minimisation of housework (for example, ordering meal deliveries instead of home cooking) and the achievement of a better work-family balance within these families.

An interviewee in her late thirties (1), a high riser in her career, lives with her much younger foreign husband and their preschool aged son. Motherhood is important for her but she did not wish to withdraw from work and public life even during the period of early child care:

When my son was a year old... I felt that if I cannot go back to my office to work with adults, at least for six hours a day, then I'll jump out of the window. I didn't feel like staying any longer in isolation... I think I would have gone back to work even if I had a rich husband...

Division of domestic tasks does not cause any problems among the partners as the husband does not mind doing some of the 'feminine' tasks, and they can afford to buy some external help, too.

...at the age of 25 I realised that one should always earn enough to hire a cleaning lady once a week, and she does the ironing, too. My husband can also do the ironing anyway. I hate ironing. And my husband also does the cooking... After all, this is a well equipped apartment with everything mechanised ... and he [husband] can pick up a broom, iron his shirts, vacuum, if necessary...

A high earner interviewee (6) working in an international company, lives with her second husband and her two children, one of whom is from her previous marriage. Originally she believed in following the traditional gendered script of role sharing but later these ideas were overrode by new opportunities opening for her after the political system change. The resulting 'role reversal' led to the failure of her first marriage and a learning experience that resulted in developing a much more harmonious second marriage:

We have a little bit of role confusion because I think I should have been born a man and he should have been born a woman... [in my first marriage] every evening I waited for my husbands with home-cooked meals - my husband went out at 7 am and got home at 9 pm...but he didn't earn anything, and then I decided that I should start earning.

Another interviewee (16), the second wife of her more than twenty years older husband, working in the private sector, consciously prepared to provide the right circumstances for her husband, having a financially unprofitable, but intellectually rewarding work. They have one child together, whom they raise in harmony, respecting each other's professional and family activities. However, she is aware of the responsibility deriving from the fact that she is the primary breadwinner; she can also foresee that this situation could affect her future choices and might even force her to compromise when choosing her workplace:

It comes to my mind nowadays more often ... that after all I am the main breadwinner, thus I cannot suddenly change my mind: if I don't like it here I

cannot just quit and go for another job... because I am the one who provides for the whole family.

In her view the three year long parental leave that keeps mainly mothers away from the labour market is not the best solution for women – despite its alleged desirability according to social expectations:

I am convinced that a child will be all right when their parents are. I could have stayed at home for three years, but that wouldn't have been very good for the child because surely... at some point it would have come out that I don't want to do this... Anyone who wants to stay home at home for three years should do that, but I don't think that this is a good solution, not even if she really wants to stay at home.

Parenting and household tasks are shared in a flexible manner in accordance with the partners' different work schedules, irrespective of the traditionally gendered nature of the given activity:

My husband deals with the kids, taking them to the kindergarten, and bringing them home, while the woman keeps working. The fact that I earn more than my husband doesn't really matter ... he teaches at the university, where there is no need to go in at 9 am... so he has much more freedom to come and go. And when he is at home he does a lot of chores.

An economist interviewee (22), working at a large foreign airline, lives with her husband whose educational background is lower than hers and their two children in a town near Budapest. As her outstandingly well-paying job requires her to spend several days abroad every week, without her husband's 'role reversal', she would not be able to work in this job. Additionally, because one of their children is a disabled boy who needs special care, the husband stays at home with him on parental leave. She has tried to reconcile her professional and maternal duties by switching to part-time working hours after the birth of their first child, but later she was able to continue her important and very well-paying work by the complete withdrawal of the husband from the labour market, which solution at first was not received with unequivocal joy on his side:

He is a very good father, having a really great relationship with both children... If he would not do this then I wouldn't be able to work. Obviously, he is aware of this but he also feels that he had to give up his work so that I could continue with what I love to do...

Due to their family background and upbringing, they have approached family and parental duties in quite different ways at the beginning, but essentially because of her strong personality and better career opportunities they were able to work out how to cooperate effectively in order to maintain their family life.

...the difficulty in our relationship [is] that he comes from a very traditional family... Obviously, he likes the life we have, but this is also the reason why we constantly fight with each other. Ours is not a normal Hungarian relationship, where the man makes money, and the woman is expected to subordinate herself to her husband at home... With us it is just the opposite. But we talked it over who could earn more, and it is clear that I can earn orders of magnitude more... he doesn't say it, but it can be felt that it is disturbing for him that he is the one who has to adapt to me, just like his mum had to adapt to his dad.

In comparison to the previous cases, much more tension is reflected in the relationship of our psychologist (17) interviewee, characterised by great professional advancement and financial success. She met her present husband whose educational background is lower than hers on an online dating site: she chose him on the basis of consciously formulated criteria and he perfectly fits the role that was required by her from the very beginning of their relationship. However, due to the significant differences in their socialisation patterns and socio-economic status there are several conflicts and compromises, debates and repressions accompanying their life together. The interview narratives indicated that in spite of all these potential problems their relationship is fully satisfactory for her:

It turns out that [mine is] ... a terribly marketable profession, and family-friendly too. I'm very active in my work and very ambitious... My husband is ...coming and going between different jobs, paid work doesn't seem to be his terrain of self-fulfilment. It doesn't really matter for him what he does if he is with cool people, and if he is not overexploited... beautifying the house, organising holidays, enjoying ourselves together, these are the main thing in life for him... While the children were little he spent a lot of time with them, much more time than those breadwinner fathers in middle management positions with 12 hour long working times I know...

In her view the very long period of parental leave has a bad effect on equal marital relations, almost forcing women to return to traditional gendered modes of behaviour. Despite their roughly equal sharing of child care and housework related tasks she can also experience how coercive traditional role expectations can feel, especially when these are also conveyed through her husband's behaviour:

I've seen it in my environment that when the mother stays at home on child care benefit it can bring out some very patriarchal patterns in men, and they suddenly slide back a hundred years, and start to function in a much more traditional set-up than before, and after the parental leave is over, it is very difficult to get out of this set-up... I don't like it that the basic set-up is that all the monotonous routine of things should be done by women ... and what my husband does is always optional... and this makes him so cool... [while] he is only there to help out. ... My main problem is about accountability: if something is not done, I'm the one who is accountable, I have the responsibilities.

The interview narratives also reveal that the inherently egalitarian ideas of the woman coming from an intellectual family, and the gender role perceptions of the man with a traditionally gendered family background might be attuned at the level of everyday practice, but at the level of principles the two fundamentally different systems of expectations may never converge. Additionally, it is also an important aspect that there is not too much external support coming from the broader family and social environment for 'role reversed' couples.

My husband is very supportive towards my professional life, he might even be proud of me... but he looks at these things through a completely different lens... Because he is from a family with extremely conventional roles where the woman did all the classic women's activities, while his father...brought home the money, and that was his main contribution to the family division of labour. My husband is seen by his family [of origin] as a hero on a pedestal, a perfect husband and father who does an amazing job... and obviously this is one way to look at things...

4. Conclusion

Ours is the first Hungarian qualitative study, devoted to this 'irregular' subject, focusing on various work-family balance related coping strategies of Hungarian women acting as main breadwinners within their family. By examining our structurally coded interview material we could estimate the compatibility of the partners' gender norm expectations and their practical realisation, while regarding the subjective evaluation of female breadwinning we distinguished categories of external constraint and preferred choice. On the basis of our analyses we have identified four models of family relations: the traditional, the egalitarian, the externally forced role reversal and the consciously implemented role reversal models.

Our study was conducted as part of a broader research project on new gender roles and their implications for family life in Europe: when we chose this topic there was an implicit assumption that 'irregular' family formations (including those with female primary breadwinners) were likely to display new family and gender roles. However, we must admit that there were hardly any clear cases, where traditional gender role expectations of the partners entailed traditionally gendered behaviour; where (socialisation) differences between the partners unavoidably generated conflicts, and where one or both parties were unable to adapt to the emergence of some unforeseen external factors that modified their original expectations regarding their desired family life. Thus the heterogeneity of family practices with women performing primary breadwinning activities called our original assumptions into question.

By looking through the different contents and styles of primary breadwinning among the interviewed women we found that relatively tension-free family life arrangements could be produced in various ways, even when both partners seem to follow traditionally gendered family roadmaps. In such a context, the Beckerian equilibrium (characterised by female home-making and male breadwinning, supplemented with male domination and female subordination) could be seen as a

just and fair family arrangement ideal for some, while the same features can serve as conflict sources for others, whose main goals include the achievement of gender equity in their family life on the basis of, or often despite, their socialisation patterns. This latter scenario can also highlight that household efficiency and the (subjective) well-being of the household members do not necessarily associate.

Family models belonging to our traditional and egalitarian categories seemed to rest on relatively stable pillars in the sense that (at least according to the interviewed women's perspectives) both partners' family practices related expectations largely overlapped, and this firm structure did not seem to be shaken even by the irregular income generating pattern of the partners that is seen as highly unusual in present day Hungary. However, most of the interviewees belonged to the other two role reversal related categories, where at least a part of the reversed role performances developed as a result of external constraints, and did not reflect the expectations of (at least one of) the partners: these patterns theoretically included strong potentials for emerging tensions and conflicts. At the same time, we cannot assert that these relationships were always conflictual or more vulnerable than others, since (the often unavoidable) adaptation to external conditions could make the partners learn to listen to each other more carefully and accommodate themselves to the new challenges in ways potentially leading to the development of harmonious family life arrangements.

Our most populous category of the consciously implemented role reversal model included various cases representing an (at least in Hungary) still quite unusual set of female family practices, where ambitious career women are able to determine the developmental features of their relationship and family cooperation. If their male partners accept this atypical setting and they are also able to cope with the potential disapproval of the extended family and the social environment, they can create a well-functioning, largely tension-free relationship. In those cases, however, where female dominance goes together with neglecting the male partner's ideas and desires, an unbalanced relationship is likely to develop, which can be just as vulnerable as those more traditional settings where masculine primacy interferes with the female partner's self-assertion and career development opportunities.

One of the main limitations of our study is that we could present only the female breadwinners' perspectives since our limited resources did not allow us to conduct interviews with other family members, including the out-earned husbands. Another limitation derives from the lack of longitudinal data: our narrative interviews present the interviewees' relationship and work-life histories as well as childbearing related life events from a present-day perspective, thus we can have only some assumptions about the stability of the relationships and the future functioning of these families. We cannot be sure either whether the results of our qualitative research highlight the main features of Hungarian women being in a primary breadwinning position in their family; and it can be even less known whether the main female breadwinner family setting that still counts as quite unusual in Hungary will gain greater legitimacy following the increasing educational level of women, the further spread of dual-earner families, the (to be hoped for) decrease in gender-based discrimination and further inevitable steps towards gender equity. However, despite these limitations we believe that the present study does contribute to a better understanding of female primary breadwinning practices in Hungary and elsewhere.

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